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William Weston: early voyager to the New World*

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Abstract

The Bristol merchant William Weston was the first known Englishman to lead an expedition to North America. Analysis of two important document finds suggests that Weston was an early supporter of the Venetian explorer John Cabot. A monetary reward demonstrates Henry VII's satisfaction with the outcome of Weston's voyage of c. 1499 and the king's continuing commitment to transatlantic discovery after Cabot's presumed disappearance. Weston's career is examined in detail to throw light on the nature and motivation of England's earliest Atlantic explorers.

Before 2008 William Weston, merchant of Bristol, was no more than a footnote to Bristol's overseas trade. He emerged from obscurity as a result of an article in this journal on the unpublished research claims of Dr. Alwyn Ruddock (d. 2005), a former Reader at Birkbeck College and the leading authority on the voyages of discovery launched from Bristol to North America from c. 1470–1508.¹ Two things made the article unusual and went on to capture the public's imagination. First, Ruddock's assertions were astounding. She claimed to have found evidence that Bristol men had reached North America prior to John Cabot's famous 1497 expedition, which initiated Europe's exploration and settlement of the northern continent. Ruddock also argued for a previously unknown religious colony allegedly established in Newfoundland in 1498; and she offered reasons to believe that the Bristol explorers had charted much of the eastern seaboard of North America by 1500, long before those coasts were investigated by Juan Ponce de Leon (1513–21) and Giovanni da Verrazzano (1524). Second, the strangeness of Ruddock's actions was enthralling. She failed to publish finds made over a forty-year period and then ordered the destruction of those discoveries in her will. It seemed incredible that an academic could unearth such amazing things and then seek to keep them secret. In combination, these two factors ensured that both the initial article and the follow-up research published in *Historical Research* received international press coverage.² It also led to an unusually large

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¹ E. T. Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock: "John Cabot and the discovery of America"', *Hist. Research*, lxxxi (2008), 224–54. Ruddock's ideas had survived as a book synopsis in the archives of Exeter University Press.

² Examples of the press coverage cited: <<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/history/research/cabot/>> [Accessed 7 Feb. 2017].

readership for an academic journal, with the three articles becoming among the most downloaded items in its history.³

Evan Jones's initial article set out Ruddock's numerous claims. It showed that all were plausible and that some could be verified. Major question marks remained, however, as to whether her more extraordinary statements were based in fact. Such concerns were addressed in subsequent articles. The first went some way to confirming one of Ruddock's key findings: that William Weston had undertaken a previously unknown discovery expedition from Bristol at the very end of the fifteenth century.⁴ The second article identified a document that proved, as Ruddock had suggested, that John Cabot received funding from 'Italian bankers' based in London. Those bankers were found to be the Florentine house of the Bardi, which maintained a London branch of the firm.⁵ So, rather than being purely English sponsored expeditions, as had always been assumed, Cabot's voyages from Bristol were among the many European expeditions of this period that were funded by Italian financiers, especially those of the city-states of Genoa and Florence, but which were prosecuted under different national flags.⁶ At least some of Ruddock's extraordinary claims had substance.

Ruddock had suggested that William Weston's independent expedition involved a passage north from Newfoundland along the coast of Labrador, as far as the entrance of the Hudson Straits, presumably to seek a northern route around the continent. We know for certain that Weston projected a transatlantic voyage. A letter from Henry VII ordered his lord chancellor to suspend legal proceedings against Weston because the king intended that the merchant should 'shortly *with goddes grace passe and saille* for to serche and fynde if he can the new founde land'. This letter confirmed a key part of Ruddock's narrative and was, indeed, one of the 'new documents' that underpinned her research. Yet the letter on its own did not prove that the expedition took place and it did not demonstrate that Weston was one of Cabot's principal supporters, or that he was rewarded by the king for his efforts, as Ruddock had implied. Moreover, while the investigation of the chancery case that lay behind the king's letter revealed a little of William Weston's character and background, he remained a shadowy figure. This was disappointing given that, while John Cabot has long been famous, nothing has ever been known about the identity, motivations or social position of his Bristol supporters.

This article provides some answers. It finds in William Weston a man whose career has uncanny parallels to that of John Cabot; and it identifies further material to support Ruddock's assertions. It will begin by examining two pieces of evidence that relate to Weston's voyage and his relationship with Cabot. They appear to be two more of the twenty-three new 'Cabot' documents that Ruddock claimed to have unearthed during her decades of research.⁷ As will be seen, they serve to confirm further elements of the case she intended to make. The article will then investigate Weston himself to throw light

³ *Historical Research, Annual Publisher's Report* (2012 and 2016).

⁴ E. T. Jones, 'Henry VII and the Bristol expeditions to North America: the Condon documents', *Hist. Research*, lxxxiii (2010), 444–54. A revised and annotated version of the letter is: 'Henry VII's letter to John Morton concerning William Weston's voyage to the new found land', ed. M. M. Condon and E. T. Jones (University of Bristol, 2011) <<https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/3020879/2011westonletter.pdf>> [accessed 13 July 2018].

⁵ F. Guidi Bruscoli, 'John Cabot and his Italian financiers', *Hist. Research*, lxxxv (2012), 372–93.

⁶ Guidi Bruscoli, 'John Cabot and his Italian financiers', pp. 374, 392; E. T. Jones and M. M. Condon, *Cabot and Bristol's Age of Discovery* (Bristol, 2016), pp. 26–7, 93.

⁷ Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock', pp. 228, 253. Subsequent research has shown that Ruddock revised her first total of 21 to 23, intending to include the texts as an appendix to her Exeter book.

on the nature, background and motivations of the first Englishman known to have led an expedition to the New World.⁸ It will argue that, far from being a selfless and romantic hero explorer of the type so fondly imagined in the nineteenth century, Weston's activities and legal shenanigans suggest a risk-taker and opportunist, who may have supported Cabot, at least in part, as a way of escaping his entanglements in Bristol.

As noted, the first key 'Weston' document was published in 2010. Henry VII's letter ran under his signet and sign manual, but was dated only as 12 March at Greenwich. Closer dating was achieved by correlation to the king's itinerary, and from its addressee, Cardinal Morton. The analysis showed that the voyage could only have taken place in 1498, 1499 or 1500, with the most likely date of sailing being 1499. The Bristol merchant probably operated under the letters patent granted in 1496 to John Cabot, since that gave Cabot and his deputies or assigns exclusive rights to sail westwards under the king's colours.⁹

The most important new evidence concerns rewards made to Weston by Henry VII. The first connects him to Cabot; the second relates to Weston's own expedition. In the week of 8–12 January 1498, the accounts of the king's treasurer of the chamber record this payment: 'Item to William Weston of bristoll – xl s'.¹⁰ Such one-off payments typically followed personal contact with the king and represented *ex gratia* rewards for good service, or were an expression of the king's good will or largesse. No reason for the forty-shilling disbursement is given, but that is typical of the books.¹¹ Weston's appearance is noteworthy because he was a minor merchant who does not appear to have held civic office of any form in Bristol. He is very unlikely to have been sent to Henry VII on the town's business. When we consider that Weston later led an expedition to the New World, with the king's overt support, it becomes highly probable that he was rewarded in January 1498 because he was already involved in the Bristol ventures. This suggestion can be reinforced. The reward to Weston immediately followed this entry: 'to a venysian in Rewarde – lxxvj s viij d'. Although the Venetian is unnamed, it has long been assumed that this entry records a payment to John Cabot, who was at court periodically from August 1497 to February 1498 and who had already twice been rewarded in this way – without being identified by name in the king's books.¹² Further, we know that on some of these occasions Cabot was accompanied to court by his Bristol 'companions'. On 18 December 1497 the Milanese ambassador, who had encountered the Bristolians, reported that when the explorers returned from their successful 1497 voyage, Cabot 'as a foreigner and a poor man, would not have obtained credence, had it not been that his companions, who are practically all English and from Bristol, testified that he spoke the truth'.¹³ Discussing plans for the 1498 voyage, which would prove to be John Cabot's third and last venture, the ambassador went on to describe the Bristol men as 'great

⁸ While the claims of the Bristol merchants Robert Thorne the elder, and his partner Hugh Eliot, to be the first discoverers of the 'new found lands' have long been known, the only hard evidence relating to their voyages belongs to the years after 1500 (J. A. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII* (Hakluyt Society, 2nd ser., cxx, 1962), pp. 26–9, 131–9, 247–8, 250–64; D. B. Quinn, *New American World: a Documentary History of North America to 1612* (5 vols., 1979), i. 103, 109–18, 181–9.

⁹ Jones, 'Henry VII and the Bristol expeditions to North America', pp. 447–9.

¹⁰ The National Archives of the U.K., E 101/414/16, fo. 12.

¹¹ This sum is equivalent to about four months pay for an ordinary labourer.

¹² Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 87–91, 214, 226–7; 'Warrant for the payment of John Cabot's pension, February 1498', ed. M. M. Condon and E. T. Jones (University of Bristol, 2011) <<https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/3258589/2011cabotpensionwarrant.pdf>> [accessed 13 July 2018]; E. T. Jones, 'Bristol, Cabot and the New Found Land, 1496–1500', in *Exploring Atlantic Transitions: Archaeologies of Permanence and Transience in New Found Lands*, ed. P. E. Pope and S. Lewis-Simpson (Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology Monograph, vii, Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 29–30.

¹³ Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 209–11.

seamen' and the 'leading men in this enterprise'.¹⁴ Since the king was closely involved in matters to do with Cabot's expeditions in the winter of 1497/8, it seems likely that Weston was one of these companions, with the January payments to the 'Venetian' and Weston following on from a meeting between Cabot, the Bristol merchant and Henry VII. In short, although Weston's role in Cabot's expeditions is not defined, he may have been involved with the Venetian since 1496, when the explorer undertook his first, unsuccessful, voyage from Bristol. Weston was probably one of Cabot's companions on the 1497 voyage and he was certainly involved with him by the time the 1498 voyage was being planned. This early connection to Cabot, and the fact that Weston had already come into direct contact with the king, may explain why Henry VII was later willing to intervene on Weston's behalf, so that he could lead his own expedition from Bristol.

The second and hitherto unremarked reward appears to be the source for Ruddock's claim that Weston received financial compensation following his 1499 expedition. This reward took the form of a grant of thirty pounds to Weston, made by an assignment on Bristol customs revenues for the fiscal year ending 29 September 1500. What this method of payment meant in practice is that a tally would have been struck in Weston's name at the exchequer of receipt at Westminster: in effect, an order to pay the bearer. Weston was then to receive his money directly from the local customs officers. The only surviving record of this transaction is unusual and some discussion will be required to show what can and cannot be inferred from it. The entry consists of an explanatory memorandum written in the margin of the enrolled account of the two Bristol customs officers for the year running from Michaelmas 1499 to Michaelmas 1500. It reads:

*Videlicet xxx li ultra feodum et habeantur pro eisdem xxx li talliam pro W Weston mercatore Bristoll' pro expensis suis circa inuencionem noue terre.*¹⁵

In translation this becomes:

Namely £30 above the fee [of the customers] and let them have for the said £30 a tally for W[illiam] Weston, merchant of Bristol, for his expenses about the finding of the new land.

The wording indicates that an order had been made to compensate Weston for costs incurred in exploring the New World – the entry itself containing the earliest-known use in England of something akin to 'Terra Nova'. As such, the king's letter of 12 March and his subsequent reward mirror each other, being the first English documents to refer, respectively, to the 'new found land' and 'terra nova'. These were to become the common alternate ways of describing Newfoundland, but are unlikely, at this early date, to have had such a specific geographic connotation.

The memorandum recording Weston's reward can be roughly dated by reference to the date of audit of the Bristol customs account. This audit fell between 14 January and 24 February 1501, or soon thereafter, since it may have extended beyond a single term.¹⁶ The entry appears to preserve a verbal order made in the course of audit; behind it must

¹⁴ Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 45–65, 88, 91–4, 203–05, 209–14; E. T. Jones, 'The Matthew of Bristol and the financiers of John Cabot's 1497 voyage to North America', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, cxxi, (2006), 781–3.

¹⁵ T.N.A., E 356/23, rot. 4, account of customers of Bristol, Mich. 15–16 Hen. VII. The entry is only fully legible under ultraviolet light.

¹⁶ T.N.A., E 356/23, rot. 4, marginal note of audit date. The States of Account, E 102/310, are not, in this instance, helpful in offering greater precision. On term dates, and the chronology of final audit, see S. Jenks, *The London Customs Accounts 24 Henry VI (1445–46)*, ed. S. Jenks (Hansischen Geschichtsverein: Quellen und Darstellungen zur Hansischen Geschichte, new ser., lxxiv, Köln, 2018), pp. xxiv–lx, 292–308.

lie some form of authorization from the king. No other original warrant survives; and the poor survival of the receipt rolls means that it is not possible to be more precise about the date of issue of the tally.¹⁷

While the order and its dating are clear, its execution is not, being obscured by the many fictions and intricacies of exchequer accounting.¹⁸ If insufficient warrant were shown, for example, then a payment might fail to pass at audit. The first payment on Cabot's pension, backdated by his letters patent to revenues arising from an accounting year already closed, is a well-known instance that required a supplementary mandate from the king.¹⁹ Tallies were also used as an instrument to provide retrospective validation for audit purposes of a local payment that had already been made in response to a direct order from the Crown.²⁰ While they fulfilled an important accounting and credit function, the use of the tally, in contrast to a direct and dateable cash payment, obscures the sequence of authorization, date, and redemption. Even in normal use a tally recorded a dated but fictional payment from the accountant into the exchequer, and provided valid discharge only once both parts of the tally had been united following the third-party payment.

Did Weston actually receive his reward? Here the record becomes contradictory. Once all allowances had been made and proven by warrants, receipts and tallies, and the customers granted their fees, their account for 1499–1500, as preserved in the engrossing hand of the enrolment, showed a balance of thirty pounds due to the Crown rather than the 'nil' amount that would have resulted had payment on Weston's tally been already incorporated in the body of the account. This formal record can be traced to its conclusion. In so doing, it suggests that exchequer process ran in customary form against Richard Ameryk and Arthur Kemys, the two Bristol customers, to recover this balance as an outstanding debt. They finally secured their discharge with a cash payment of the full thirty pounds into the Exchequer on 10 February 1507, by which time both had long been removed from office, and Ameryk had died.²¹ What all this means in practice is that it is not possible to date the original order precisely, or to be sure about when, or even if, Weston collected his money.

Despite the uncertainties about its execution, the payment ordered for William Weston, taken in conjunction with the earlier letter, confirms that he undertook a voyage to the New World and that the king had granted him a thirty pounds reward

¹⁷ Both a warrant and an entry in the receipt rolls would have provided a more closely defined *terminus ad quem* for Weston's return. That the charge was placed on the account running Michaelmas 1499–1500, however, seems broadly to anchor the completion of Weston's voyage. Surviving records of the receipt are: T.N.A., E 403/2558 (register of great and privy seal warrants); E 404/82–4, 86 (original warrants, including letters under the signet). For the year 15 Henry VII there survives only a badly damaged 'Michaelmas' receipt roll, E 401/991. Most extant entries are for Hilary term, to 22 Feb. 1500, and the only mention of Bristol customs is as part of an assignment for the king's household. No further receipt roll survives until Michaelmas 17 Henry VII (Oct. 1501). The tellers' rolls, E 405/80, are also incomplete.

¹⁸ For exchequer accounting procedures and the problems of their interpretation, see Jenks, *London Customs Accounts*, Introduction; J. D. Alsop, 'The exchequer in late medieval government', in *Aspects of Late Medieval Government and Society*, ed. J. G. Rowe (Toronto, 1986), pp. 179–212.

¹⁹ 'Warrant for the payment of John Cabot's pension'. For other, similar, instances, see J. M. Currin, "'Pro expensis Ambassatorum': diplomacy and financial administration in the reign of Henry VII', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, cviii (1993), 589–609.

²⁰ For examples, see T.N.A., E 404/82, 3, 10 Dec. 1495, 28 Oct. 1496; E 36/131, p. 262.

²¹ T.N.A., E 368/274, States and Views Hil. 16 Hen VII, rot. 1d; E 372/349, Bristol; E 102/310, Mich. 16 Hen. VII; E 356/24, rot. 1. A late source suggests Ameryk died in 1503/4, before the end of Feb. 1504 (Bristol Record Office (B.R.O.), 13748/4; T.N.A., E 159/282, Recorda, Eas. 19 Hen VII, rot. 28). The payment is duly recorded as a cash receipt on the receipt and tellers' rolls (T.N.A., E 401/1005; E 405/80, m. 56).

towards his costs. While the date of the expedition is not indicated, the timing of the payment fits best with a 1499 voyage; albeit, on the evidence found thus far, a voyage in 1498 or 1500 cannot be entirely ruled out. Although the reward may not seem overly generous, it compares favourably with the initial ten-pound reward made to Cabot on his return from his 1497 expedition, and is consistent with the general pattern of the king's rewards to English merchant-explorers of the following decade. Given this, it would be very good to know where Weston went and what he achieved. As discussed earlier, Ruddock, who knew of Weston's ventures and was apparently aware of the above payments, seems to have believed that his expedition went up into the north-west Atlantic, possibly as far as the Hudson Strait, in a ship she identified as the *Dominus Nobiscum*.²² Unfortunately, no contemporary records have yet been found relating to this ship or expedition.

That the first Englishman to lead an expedition to the New World should have gone unnoticed for over 500 years may seem surprising. The 'discovery' of America by Columbus in 1492 and its subsequent exploration, conquest and colonization have been regarded as events of such moment for such a long time, that it is easy to forget that they were not widely viewed this way at the time. Even Columbus had slipped from the public eye by the time of his death in 1506, and his achievements were eclipsed for decades.²³ And if this was the case with the earliest Spanish expeditions, it was all the more true of the English ones. Following Cabot's return from North America in August 1497, it was said that he was hailed at the English court as the 'Great Admiral', about whom the English ran after 'like mad'.²⁴ Any period of celebrity appears to have been short lived, however, with few English annalists mentioning the voyages.²⁵ This indifference, combined with the disappearance of whatever sources had been generated by Cabot or his companions, meant that by the late sixteenth century, when promoters of English imperialism such as John Dee and Richard Hakluyt became interested in Cabot's ventures, there was little narrative material for them to draw on. The result was a confusion about the basic events of the Bristol voyages which was so marked that even John Cabot's name was largely forgotten for the next three centuries – it being generally supposed that it was his son, Sebastian, who led the 1497 expedition.²⁶ In this context, it is not surprising that Weston was entirely forgotten. His 'rediscovery', however, helps throw new light on England's early contribution to a process that would ultimately remake the world.

Who then was William Weston? Can Weston's life give us any insight into the formation of the early English expeditions, which were so radically different from those launched from Castile? Unfortunately, William's surname is relatively common, and his origins remain obscure. Although there was at least one prominent family called 'Weston'

²² Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock', pp. 245–50.

²³ J. H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492–1650* (Cambridge, 1970); K. Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York, 1990), pp. 213–16; E. Dursteler, 'Reverberations of the voyages of discovery in Venice, ca. 1501: the Trevisan Manuscript in the library of Congress', *Mediterranean Studies*, ix (2000), 43–5, 54–8.

²⁴ Lorenzo Pasqualigo writing on 23 August 1497 'to his brothers at Venice' (Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p. 208).

²⁵ Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 220–5; Bristol's town chronicle is silent (B.R.O., 04720, printed with omissions in *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith (Camden Soc., new ser., v, 1872)).

²⁶ H. Dalton, *Merchants and Explorers: Roger Barlow, Sebastian Cabot and Networks of Atlantic Exchange* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 214–17; Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 95–7, 147–63, 220–2.

in Bristol, it is unclear whether William was related either to them, or to other Bristol men of the same surname.²⁷ And while it is easy to distinguish the Bristol merchant from his London namesake, a mercer trading in luxury cloth, there appear to have been two ‘William Westons’ in Bristol – one being the merchant-explorer and the other one of the four sergeants-at-mace of Bristol’s staple court.²⁸

Despite uncertainties about his family connections, Weston’s mercantile activities can be confidently traced through the port’s ‘particular’ customs accounts from the late fourteen-sixties to the late fourteen-eighties.²⁹ It is extremely likely that Ruddock, with her long interest in merchant trade, used many of these documents in her search for Weston. Since 2009, however, additional accounts have been identified that can be employed to build up a better picture both of Weston’s own trade and of his economic standing in relation to other Bristol merchants. Weston is not mentioned in the surviving particulars of the early to mid fourteen-sixties, but appears in the accounts, on a fairly regular basis, and in a reasonably consistent manner, from 1469 onwards.³⁰ Over the next two decades, he traded almost exclusively with Portugal, but never at levels that might be expected of an independent merchant. Rather, his low-level trading activities suggest that he was a servant of more established Bristol merchants and shipowners. Men of this ilk could make a living as travelling factors, responsible for the security and sale of their principal’s goods, as pursers on the greater vessels, or as resident agents, living in the main ports with which Bristol’s merchants did business, buying and selling goods on commission.³¹ All these roles also offered the opportunity for the agent to conduct business in his own right.

²⁷ The more prominent family was headed by Henry Weston, gentleman, steward of the tolsey court in the 1480s (B.R.O., J/Or/1/1, fo. 245; and see J. Baker, *The Men of Court 1440–1550: a Prosopography of the Inns of Court and Chancery and the Courts of Law* (Selden Soc., suppl. ser., xviii, 2 vols., 2012), ii. 1654. For the Westons of Ashton Philip, see n. 28 below. Other Bristol Westons include a merchant, John, and possibly another William.

²⁸ For the London mercer, see H. S. Cobb, *The Overseas Trade of London: Exchequer Customs Accounts 1480–1* (London Rec. Soc., xxvii, 1990), pp. xlv, 76, 104, 106, 127; T.N.A., E 159/274 Recorda Mich. 13 Hen. VII, rots. 5d, 25; E 122/80/2, mm. 21d, 24. The sergeants were administrative officers of the mayor and staple court, responsible among other things for securing the appearance of both defendants and juries in causes before the court. Records of Bristol’s staple court appear to distinguish between William Weston ‘mercator’ and William Weston ‘sergeant’. That the two were different is also supported by the fact that the sergeant’s wife was called Margery, while the merchant was married to Agnes Foster by Aug. 1492. On the other hand, since Margery may have died in 1491, a definitive judgment is not possible on the marriage evidence (B.R.O., 01854, pp. 118, 136). The sergeant may be the son and heir of Richard Weston, gentleman. This William, with his wife Margery, relinquished to John Walshe his claim to a moiety of the manor of Ashton Philip (in Long Ashton, near Bristol) in May 1481 (B.R.O., AC/D/1/78–80b; *Calendar of Close Rolls 1476–85*, no. 1205). Since this Weston heir was born before 1435 he seems unlikely to be the explorer (T.N.A., C 1/9/185; B.R.O., 01854, *passim*); cf. Baker, *Men of Court*, ii. 1655, which must confuse two Richards. Either man, however, could have been the ‘William W attorney’ registering appearances in the tolsey court in the summer of 1478, especially since a William Weston brought actions for debt in May and June 1478 (B.R.O., JTol/J/1/1, *passim* and fos. 200v–208, 212v–218v). Yet another William was dead before 1466 (T.N.A., PROB 11/5, fo. 107v: will of Thomas Hore).

²⁹ The ‘particular’ accounts are the detailed inventories of import and export, which, in Bristol at this period, record also ships’ names and masters, and the ports of origin or destination.

³⁰ He does not appear in the accounts covering 26 March–29 Sept. 1461, 29 Sept.–28 Nov. 1465, 28 Nov. 1465–14 May 1466 (E. M. Carus-Wilson, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Later Middle Ages* (Bristol Rec. Soc., vii, 1937), pp. 209–18; T.N.A., E 122/19/3, E 122/19/4). Apart from a small fragment for Feb. 1468, there is then a gap in the records until 1469.

³¹ For discussions of the activities of such men, see G. Connell-Smith, *Forerunners of Drake: a Study of English Trade with Spain in the Early Tudor Period* (1954), pp. 12–14, 20–30; I[ohn] B[rown], *The Marchants Aviso* [1589], ed. P. V. McGrath (Cambridge, Mass., 1957); *The Ledger of John Smythe 1538–50*, ed. J. Vanes (Bristol Rec. Soc., xxviii, 1975), pp. 12–14.

The circumscribed nature of William Weston's mercantile activities, and the consistent pattern of his trade, suggest that the customs records relate to just one man. That Weston first figures in the accounts at the end of the fourteen-sixties implies that he was born before 1450. He would therefore no longer have been young when he sailed to the New World. Weston's earliest recorded trade is to Iberia: on 7 September 1469, he imported a half-ton of olive oil and a half-ton of salt from Lisbon on the *Mary Redcliffe* of Bristol. Then, on 28 September, he dispatched seven woollen cloths to Lisbon on the *Trinity* of Bristol.³² These are all commodities characteristic of Bristol's import/export trade. The one extant account for 1470 indicates that Weston again shipped on the *Trinity*, lading thirteen cloths when it departed for Lisbon on 10 September.³³ Thereafter, in so far as the very imperfect account survivals record, Weston can be shown to be shipping at most twice a year, in slightly increasing amounts, to and from Lisbon and, on one occasion, Seville.³⁴ That he only twice participated in Bristol's thriving and well-documented trade with Bordeaux, and only once with the Basque ports, suggests that he was a specialist functionary, valued for his familiarity with Lisbon's port, trade and administration. This knowledge probably included a range of contacts in the city – as well, of course, as an ability to speak Portuguese.

What is most noteworthy about William Weston's activities during the fourteen-seventies is that five of his nine known shipments on English vessels were on the *Trinity* of Bristol.³⁵ This was a 360-ton vessel, which appears to have been owned jointly by at least three Bristol merchants: John Jay, William Byrd and William Wodyngton.³⁶ The *Trinity* is well known to discovery historians, since it was employed in 1481 by the Bristol customer Thomas Croft and by other merchants, probably including Jay, to undertake a voyage of Atlantic exploration having, with scarcely less enterprise, completed a trading

³² T.N.A., E 122/19/6, fos. 3, 4v. This account covers only 26 Aug.–14 Nov. 1469.

³³ T.N.A., E 122/19/7, fo. 3. This account covers only 18 Aug.–4 Nov. 1470. The 'cloth of assize' was a statute woollen broadcloth, 24 yards long and about 1.75 yards wide, typically recorded in customs accounts as 'pannus/pannus curtus sine grano', i.e., not expensively dyed with 'grain' (kermes).

³⁴ Particulars (T.N.A., E 122) survive for most years in the 1470s. Some are fragmentary or damaged, and the bias of survival is to the summer months, from Easter to Michaelmas. Datasets are being published on the University of Bristol's 'Explore Bristol Research' website <<https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/>> [accessed 19 July 2018], with a published edition to follow in the Bristol Record Society Series. With these caveats, Weston's record is as follows: 1471, March to Michaelmas, not mentioned; in 1472 laded four cloths on the *Trinity* of Bristol sailing to 'Hispania' (northern Spain) on 20 Aug.; in 1473 imported 60 tuns of wine from Bordeaux on the *Horseshoe* of Bristol on 10 June, and 1.5 tuns of wine from Seville on the *Trinity* of Bristol on 15 June; in 1474 exported 23 cloths and 16 Welsh cloths to Portugal on the *Michael* of Oporto on 11 May. He is not mentioned in the March to September account for 1475; that for 1476 is a mere fragment. The account for Michaelmas 1477/8 shows Weston lading on the *Trinity* of Bristol, bound for Lisbon 2 Oct. 1477. He shipped 12 cloths and 50 strait Welsh 'dozens' – the latter being narrow or single (i.e., half-width) woollen cloths, about 12 yards long (half-length), and of lower quality than a broadcloth. On the return journey, reaching Bristol on 14 April, Weston imported 6 tuns of oil; and then, in a round voyage of the *George Berkeley* to Lisbon, 3 June and 17 Sept. 1478, he exported 16 cloths and imported 3.5 tuns of oil. In 1479 (covering 11 April (Easter) to 22 July only), Weston was the sole shipper on the *John* of St. Pol de Léon, bound for Lisbon, lading 24 short-cloths, three tons of iron and 60 Welsh strait 'dozens' on 12 May. The next surviving account is for Michaelmas 1479 to Easter 1480. It contains no reference to Weston.

³⁵ The exceptions are a summer return voyage on the *George Berkeley* to Lisbon in 1478, the *Trinity* having recently returned to Bristol; and to Bordeaux in, probably, October 1471, on John Foster's first *Anthony* (undated fragment in T.N.A., E 122/174/3).

³⁶ For the size, ownership and voyages of the *Trinity*, see 'The accounts of John Balsall, purser of the *Trinity* of Bristol 1480–1', ed. T. F. Reddaway and A. A. Ruddock, *Camden Miscellany XXIII* (Camden Soc., 4th ser., vii, 1969), pp. 3–7.

voyage to Oran, on the north coast of Africa, the preceding year.³⁷ If Weston's systematic lading on the ship was a result of a formal connection to its owners, perhaps as a purser or attorney, he would have been dealing in the fourteen-seventies with men who had the same sort of interest in expanding Bristol's commercial horizons that he would later exhibit.

There are two extraordinary exceptions to the predictable pattern of Weston's trade. On 10 June 1473, the unusually-named *Horseshoe* of Bristol entered port carrying sixty tuns of wine in Weston's name, and a further twenty and a half tons of iron, woad and rosin for two other Bristol merchants.³⁸ Since the wholesale price of Bordeaux wine in England was around four to five pounds per tun, Weston's shipment would have represented an enormous and high-risk investment; if the ship went down, he would have lost everything.³⁹ Whether by misfortune or mismanagement, Weston never again traded at this level. The second exception is of special interest for this article in that it concerns a commercial voyage undertaken to a recently colonized Atlantic island. On 18 May 1480, Weston laded 141 cloths of various types on a Breton ship, the *Mawdelyn* of Quimperlé, bound for Madeira.⁴⁰ The cloth was valued at £72 16s 8d, Weston's largest recorded export shipment. This consignment accounted for the bulk of the ship's lading, since the shipmaster and John Pynke, a well-established Bristol merchant, laded a mere eleven cloths between them. The venture is noteworthy in that it is the first known voyage from Bristol directly to one of the Atlantic islands, which had only been rediscovered, and then colonized, by Portugal in the first half of the fifteenth century. William Weston's venture thus appears to represent a pioneering attempt to open a direct trade route to Madeira, the intent presumably being to cut out the costs incurred in trading via Lisbon. Since there was no English presence on the island, or tradition of direct trade, Weston probably travelled with his merchandise.⁴¹ On the other hand, if Weston hoped to establish a new trade route for Bristol, he seems to have failed; for there is no record of the port's merchants engaging in any further voyages to the Portuguese Atlantic islands in the surviving customs accounts of July–September 1483, 1485/6, 1486/7, 1487/8, 1492/3 or 1503/4. Indeed, these accounts contain only one other clear reference to a direct voyage between Bristol and Portugal's Atlantic islands – the arrival of the *Mare Petat'* from Madeira on 19 September 1486, carrying sugar and bowstaves, all belonging to foreign merchants.⁴² Nevertheless, Weston's voyage is important, since it falls early in the first wave of English engagement in trade with the Atlantic islands and the west coast of Africa. Within little more than a generation this trade would become commercially valuable.⁴³

Whether or not Weston profited from his 1480 Madeira voyage, the enterprise demonstrates his willingness to undertake what was, for Bristol, a new venture. It also

³⁷ 'Accounts of John Balsall', pp. 5–14: Ruddock assumes that the 1481 ship was the *navis*, although the name is a common one. For Jay's interest in exploration, see *William Worcestre: the Topography of Medieval Bristol*, ed. F. Neale (Bristol Rec. Soc., li, 2000), p. 235.

³⁸ The *Horseshoe* disappears from the customs accounts following its departure to Bordeaux on 27 Aug. 1473. On that occasion Weston does not appear to have laded on it (T.N.A., E 122/19/10, fos. 7v, 17v).

³⁹ A. L. Simon, *The History of the Wine Trade in England* (2 vols., 1906–7), ii. 264–6.

⁴⁰ Carus-Wilson, *Overseas Trade of Bristol*, p. 285.

⁴¹ In this context it may be significant that the *Trinity* had departed for Lisbon only two weeks before the Madeira voyage, but carried no goods for Weston (Carus-Wilson, *Overseas Trade of Bristol*, p. 281).

⁴² T.N.A., E 122/20/5, fo. 31r–v. After re-lading, it continued to 'Portugal' (E 122/20/7, mm. 2, 3).

⁴³ G. V. Scammell, 'The English in the Atlantic islands, c.1450–1650', *Mariners Mirror*, lxxii (1986), 295–300; H. Dalton, "'Into speyne to selle for slavys': English, Spanish and Genoese merchant networks and their involvement with the "cost of gwynea" trade prior to 1550', in *Brokers of Change: Atlantic Commerce and Cultures in Pre-Colonial Western Africa*, ed. T. Green (Oxford, 2012), pp. 96–9, 112–16.

suggests that the knowledge he had acquired of Portugal's trade had made him confident that he could augment his profits by trading directly with Madeira, rather than via Lisbon.⁴⁴ Beyond this, a personal visit to Madeira could have provided Weston with the opportunity to learn more about the Portuguese push south, since the island was a stopping point for those travelling down to Cape Verde, the Portuguese factories on the Gold Coast, and beyond. Regardless of whether the voyage was successful commercially, Weston would have gained insights into Portugal's Atlantic and colonial ventures.⁴⁵

If Weston appears to have been a man of enterprise, he was far from alone among his fellow citizens. In the first half of the fifteenth century, Bristol had been instrumental in opening up the Iceland trade; and in 1457/8 merchants from the port had undertaken England's first expedition into the eastern Mediterranean, in an apparent attempt to break the Italian monopoly on trade to this region.⁴⁶ While this expedition fell foul of Genoese-backed pirates, Bristol merchants and their factors were sailing there again by the late fourteen-seventies, albeit on Spanish vessels.⁴⁷ Apart from these commercial expeditions, the port was also involved in exploratory ventures out into the Atlantic, probably inspired by the recent successes of the Portuguese, who, between c.1420 and the mid fourteen-eighties had colonized various Atlantic islands and pushed down the African coast as far as the Cape, which was rounded to reach Natal by 1488. Bristol men, for their part, undertook pioneering expeditions out into the Atlantic and believed, indeed, that in the past one or more of their number had discovered a land to the west. They called this the Island of Brasil, which they believed to be the source of 'brazil', a valuable dye-wood. This conviction is recorded by the Basque chronicler, Lope García de Salazar (1399–1476), who observed that:

the English say that ... a vessel from Bristol found it [the island of Brasil] one dawn and, not knowing that it was it, took on there much wood for firewood, which was all of brazil, took it to their owner and, recognizing it, he became very rich. He and others went in search of it and they could not find it.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ For the growing importance of the Madeiran sugar trade, see M. Ouerfelli, *Le Sucre: Production, Commercialisation et Usages dans la Méditerranée médiévale* (Leiden, 2008), pp. 223–8, 374, 476–99.

⁴⁵ Cf. William Worcestre's references to Guinea and the Atlantic islands (R. A. Skelton, 'English knowledge of the Portuguese discoveries in the 15th century: a new document', *Actas do Congresso Internacional de História dos Descobrimentos* (6 vols. in 7, Lisbon, 1961), ii. 365–74; A. Hiatt, 'From Hulle to Cartage': maps, England, and the sea', in *The Sea and Englishness in the Middle Ages*, ed. S. I. Sobecki (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 152–3.

⁴⁶ E. M. Carus-Wilson, 'The Iceland trade', in *Studies in English Trade in the 15th Century*, ed. E. Power and M. M. Postan (1933), pp. 155–82; Robert Sturmy's *Commercial Expedition to the Mediterranean (1457/8)*, ed. S. Jenks (Bristol Rec. Soc., lviii, 2006).

⁴⁷ The *Magdalen* of Erreterria entered from Candia [now Heraklion, Crete] in Sept. 1477. The *Mary* of Bilbao came from the Levant on 18 June 1486, and on 20 Sept. 1488 the *Seynt Stephen* of Erreterria left for Candia freighted with cloth and hides. In each instance, Bristol men were the majority shippers (T.N.A., E 122/176/23 (part); E 122/20/5, fo. 25r–v; E 122/161/27, fo. 45r–v. Two of these accounts are newly identified by the authors).

⁴⁸ Text written between 1471 and 1476, and surviving in a copy of 1492 (H. L. Sharrer, 'The passing of King Arthur to the Island of Brasil in a 15th-century Spanish version of the post-vulgate *Roman du Graal*', *Romania*, xcii (1971), 65–74. Spanish text and commentary in H. L. Sharrer, *The Legendary History of Britain in Lope García de Salazar's 'Libro de las bienandanzas e fortunas'* (Pennsylvania, Phil., 1979), pp. 18, 72–3, 126–9. The translation above is by Prof. Sharrer (2007). For the enduring legend of the 'Island of Brasil', see T. J. Westropp, 'Brasil and the legendary islands of the North Atlantic: their history and fable. A contribution to the 'Atlantis' problem', *Proc. Royal Irish Academy*, xxx (1912–13), 240–60; B. Freitag, *Hy Brasil: the Metamorphosis of an Island: from Cartographic Error to Celtic Elysium* (New York, 2013).

Bristol merchants made at least two attempts to 'relocate' this land, with expeditions in search of the Island of Brasil taking place in 1480 and 1481. According to a London-based Spanish diplomat, others took place in the fourteen-nineties.⁴⁹ Indeed, belief in the island, and Bristol's prior discovery of it, was sufficiently embedded that, following Cabot's return in 1497, many assumed that the Venetian had found the legendary 'Brasil'.⁵⁰

After the single but significant mention in 1480 of the shipment to Madeira, Weston appears little in Bristol customs records of the fourteen-eighties.⁵¹ But it is the period from 1483 to 1493 that most fully establishes Weston's character and connections, and offers possible insights as to why he chose to undertake a hazardous voyage to a little-known land. In 1483 Weston is noticed for the first time shipping goods on the *Anthony*, a newly-built ship which, like the *Trinity*, was typically recorded by the Bristol customers as a *navis*, a great ship, rather than a *navicula*, the ships of between thirty tons and 150 tons that constituted the greater part of Bristol's marine.⁵² This association was to prove important. On 26 August 1483 Weston laded Welsh friezes for the *Anthony*'s passage to Lisbon.⁵³ William Weston's name is absent in 1485/6, although the *Anthony* is recorded as sailing to Lisbon on 16 November 1485.⁵⁴ Since its return to England is not reported in the Bristol accounts, it was probably chartered to carry goods to some other English port on the homeward voyage. The ship must, however, have returned to Bristol by the summer of 1486, because on 2 October the *Anthony* departed once more for Lisbon. Whether Weston laded on the outbound journey is unclear.⁵⁵ He was, however, the biggest single freighter by volume on the return journey, importing thirteen tuns of wine, one tun of oil and eighty tons of salt when the *Anthony* arrived back from Lisbon on 1 May 1487. The customable value of the ship's cargo on this occasion was £1,372.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 187–9, 228; Carus-Wilson, *Overseas Trade of Bristol*, p. 157; William Worcestre, pp. 141, 235. There is no independent evidence of voyages in the 1490s, apart from Cabot's abortive attempt of 1496; nor is there reason to suppose that Pedro de Ayala was well informed.

⁵⁰ L.-A. Vigneras, 'The Cape Breton landfall: 1494 or 1497. Note on a letter from John Day', *Canadian Hist. Rev.*, xxxviii (1957), 225–8; L.-A. Vigneras, 'État présent des études sur Jean Cabot', *Actas do Congresso*, iii, 657–67.

⁵¹ Particulars survive for the summer of 1483, and for three full years mid decade. We have newly identified the 1487/8 account.

⁵² The *Anthony* made its maiden voyage to Lisbon on 30 Oct. 1482, returning on 20 March 1483; it replaced an older ship of the same name and ownership, wrecked off La Rochelle in the winter of 1479–80 (T.N.A., E 356/22, rot. 10d; C 76/165, m. 8, licence to John Foster, 20 Nov. 1481; *British Library Harleian Manuscript* 433, ed. R. E. Horrox and P. W. Hammond (4 vols., Gloucester, 1982), iii, 19–20, writ of allowance; *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1476–85*, p. 193; Carus-Wilson, *Overseas Trade of Bristol*, pp. 135–7. For Bristol's marine, see Jones, 'The Matthew of Bristol', pp. 784–6.

⁵³ T.N.A., E 122/20/1, fos. 4v–5. It was then either delayed on its outward journey, or made an unusually fast return at the beginning of the wine season, since Ricart's *Calendar* records that a ship called the *Anthony* was 'set a lond at Holow bakkes' (an anchorage near Avonmouth) in the great storm of 15 Oct. 1483 (B.R.O., 04720, fo. 129v/*Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, p. 46; for Hollow Backs, see William Worcestre, pp. 228–9). Given the close dating, it would be useful to be sure whether the William Weston named as a witness with other 'worthy men' in the mayoral court (24 Sept. 1483) was the merchant or the sergeant (*The Great Red Book of Bristol, Part III*, ed. E. W. W. Veale (Bristol Rec. Soc., xvi, 1951), p. 64).

⁵⁴ T.N.A., E 122/20/5, fo. 2v.

⁵⁵ The manuscript is damaged, with loss of names (T.N.A., E 122/20/7, m. 2d).

⁵⁶ T.N.A., E 122/20/7, mm. 14d–15d. Since wine, 'cloths of assize' and tanned hides paid specific duties, rather than 'poundage', they were not ascribed a value in the customs accounts. For current purposes, these goods have thus been ascribed values of four pound per tun of wine, two pound per cloth and one pound per dicker of tanned hides. These valuations are roughly in line with the valuations of goods paying poundage, which were themselves conservative (W. Childs, 'Ireland's trade with England in the later middle ages', *Irish Econ. and Social History*, ix (1982), 5–33, at p. 18 n. 47; E. T. Jones, 'The Bristol shipping industry in the 16th century', (unpublished University of Edinburgh Ph.D. thesis, 1998, p. 34 n. 4).

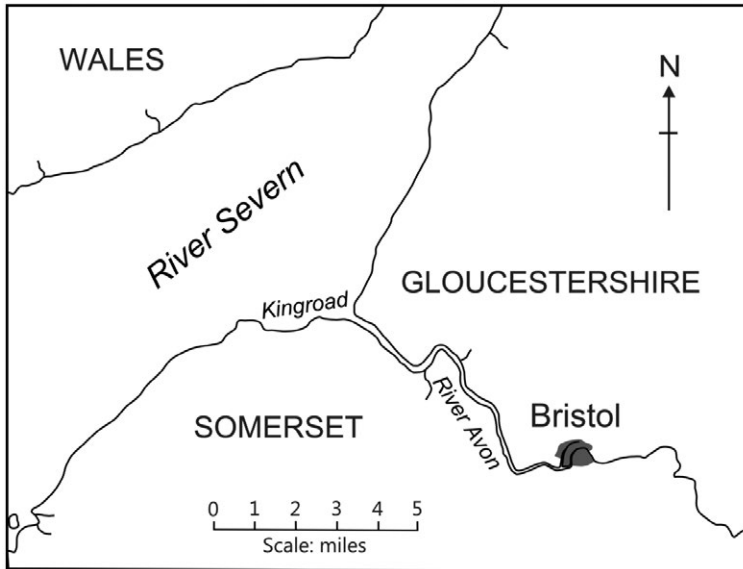


Figure 1. Map of port of Bristol (drawn by E. T. Jones).

When the ship turned round on 8 September 1487, bound once more for Lisbon, William Weston laded cloths worth £56 10s.⁵⁷ The total cargo, which consisted almost entirely of woollen cloth, belonging to fifty different merchants, can be valued for customs purposes at £1,168.⁵⁸ Given that the customable value of Bristol's trade at this time came to about £20,000–30,000 per year, this single outbound voyage would have been carrying around 5 per cent of the port's annual trade.⁵⁹ The size of the *Anthony* and the high value of its trade helps explain the significance of what happened next, and its effect on Weston's reputation.

The Lisbon voyage of 1487–8 was to be the *Anthony*'s last. According to later court records, read in conjunction with the customs' particulars and an entry in the chronicle cited below, the ship was wrecked on 25 February 1488 with the loss of all goods.⁶⁰ The disaster occurred at the very end of the *Anthony*'s return voyage, while the ship was at Kingroad, an anchorage next to Avonmouth, just six miles from Bristol, and lying within the jurisdiction of the port (see Figure 1). The event was of sufficient importance to be recorded in the town's official chronicle, which noted that 'This yere a grete Ship called the Anthony of Bristowe was lost at Kingrode in defeaute of the Master of the same ship'.⁶¹

⁵⁷ T.N.A., E 122/20/7, m. 23d, 6 short-cloths, 37 Welsh cloths and 36 Welsh strait 'dozens'.

⁵⁸ T.N.A., E 122/20/7, m. 23 and d.

⁵⁹ Although the 1486/7 account is too damaged to supply accurate trade figures, a total of approximately £26,127 can be extrapolated from the enrolled account (T.N.A., E 356/23, rot. 1). By way of comparison, the customable value of Bristol's trade was £19,614 in 1485/6, £33,793 in 1492/3 and £24,664 in 1503/4 (T.N.A., E 122/20/5; E 122/20/9; 'Bristol "Particular" Customs Account, 1503/4', ed. S. Flavin and E. T. Jones (University of Bristol, 2009) <<https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/25100363/e1221991database.xls>> [accessed 13 July 2018]).

⁶⁰ Neither the *Anthony*, nor its master of 1487/8, nor indeed Weston, are mentioned in customs or prisage particulars for 1487/8 or 1492/3.

⁶¹ B.R.O., 04720, fo. 130v/*Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, p. 47.

The loss of the *Anthony* was probably the low point in Weston's career – for he had not been a mere merchant on the ship. Rather, as he later recounted, he served as 'attourney unto John Foster of Bristowe merchaunt of a ship called the Antonye Marget'.⁶² In the context of trade, the term 'attourney' was used as a synonym for 'factor', and could also encompass a representative with wider powers.⁶³ Crucially, given Weston's known association with Foster, the latter is shown in other sources to have been the sole owner of the *Anthony*.⁶⁴ As Foster's 'attourney' Weston would have had overall responsibility for the *Anthony*, albeit the shipmaster of 1487/8, John Girdeler, would have been responsible for the day-to-day running of the ship and crew.⁶⁵ Weston's position was thus one of considerable trust. The *Anthony*, at around 380 tons burden, was the greatest ship in the Bristol marine, being the larger of only two Bristol vessels to be described in the 1485/6 and 1486/7 accounts as a *navis*, or great ship.⁶⁶ Even if it made only one return voyage each year, Weston would have been responsible for the safe passage of about a tenth of Bristol's overseas trade. Weston's employment on the ship probably explains why the *Anthony* is the only vessel on which he is recorded as lading after 1482. At this time it was common for even ordinary mariners to receive part of their wages in the form of a freight allowance called 'portage'.⁶⁷ And to ensure that his attorney had a personal interest in the safe and efficient running of the vessel, Foster might have been particularly keen on remunerating Weston by means of free or discounted freight space on the ship. If so, this probably explains the eighty tons of salt Weston laded on the *Anthony* on its return voyage to Bristol in May 1487. This consignment is relevant because the commercial freight rates for goods sent from southern Iberia to Bristol, at around twenty to twenty-five shillings per ton, were much greater than the cost of salt in Bristol, which was valued for customs purposes at 8s 4d per ton.⁶⁸ Weston's lading would thus only have made sense if he had been able to ship the salt freight-free, or at a heavily reduced rate. Foster, for his part, would probably only have accepted such a deduction if the salt was laded towards the end of the *Anthony*'s time in Lisbon, after it had become clear that further freight space could not be sold prior to the departure date specified on the charterparty.⁶⁹

⁶² T.N.A., C 1/175/45, edited as 'William Weston v Thomas Smith, Chancery Petition, 1490', ed. M. M. Condon and E. T. Jones (University of Bristol, 2012) < <https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/8319603/2012westonpetition.pdf> > [accessed 8 Feb. 2017].

⁶³ 'Accounts of John Balsall', pp. 6–7.

⁶⁴ See above, n. 52.

⁶⁵ Connell-Smith, *Forerunners of Drake*, p. 27; 'Accounts of John Balsall', pp. 6–7. On small ships the full management of a vessel was typically the responsibility of the shipmaster (R. Ward, *The World of the Medieval Shipmaster: Law, Business and the Sea, c.1350–1450* (Woodbridge, 2009), pp. 69–121).

⁶⁶ The other was the *Mary Grace* (T.N.A., E 122/20/7, m. 25, of about 320 tons burden; cf. *William Worcestre*, p. 140). On the *Anthony*'s return to Bristol on 1 May 1487 voyage it paid custom on 174.75 tuns of wine, 106 tuns of oil, 80 tons of salt, 1.5 tons of wax, 1 tun of vinegar and 39.5 cwt. 'grayn' (kermes). The ships recorded lading was thus about 365 tons (E 122/20/7, mm. 14d–15d). It had probably been laded with slightly more than this, given the illegibility of some entries, while 'ullage' (i.e., leakage) of liquid cargoes commonly resulted in the loss of about 10% of a consignment en route from Bordeaux to London (*Documents Illustrating the Overseas Trade of Bristol in the 16th Century*, ed. J. Vanes (Bristol Rec. Soc., xxxi, 1979), pp. 85–6). The original lading is thus likely to have been in the region of 380 tons.

⁶⁷ Ward, *World of the Medieval Shipmaster*, pp. 107–13.

⁶⁸ For freight rates, see Jones, 'The Bristol shipping industry in the 16th century', pp. 14–16; 32 Hen. 8, c. 14 (*Statutes of the Realm*, iii. 760–63). It should be noted that customs valuations, which were by this time typically determined using a book of rates, tended to be conservative.

⁶⁹ Although salt was sometimes taken on as ballast, this would have not have been needed in this case; see also Connell-Smith, *Forerunners of Drake*, p. 26.

As noted earlier, when the *Anthony* of Bristol was lost in February 1488, the official view in Bristol seems to have been that this had occurred ‘at Kingrode’ because of a ‘defaute of the Master of the same ship’. The disaster was thus blamed on the shipmaster’s negligence. Nevertheless, while Weston was Foster’s factor or attorney, rather than the *Anthony*’s master, Weston might have been deemed culpable if he had failed to ensure that the ship was properly looked after. Whether or not this was the case, it seems likely that his later handling of a suit for debt, in which the *Anthony*’s shipwreck was pleaded as his excuse for non-payment, would have won him little sympathy in Bristol.

William Weston recorded his version of the events relating to the loss in a petition he presented to the court of chancery, submitted some ‘ij yere past and more’ after the wreck of the *Anthony*.⁷⁰ While the ship had been at Lisbon, Weston had, he said, borrowed twelve pounds by way of ‘exchange’ from Thomas Smith of Bristol, the agreement being that he would repay £15 6s 8d within twenty-one days of the *Anthony*’s arrival at Kingroad. The justification for the high rate of interest was that the loan would only be repayable if the ship returned home safely. The agreement therefore looks like a standard ‘sea loan’, with the £3 16s 8d interest being permissible under usury laws because it represented the ‘adventure’ or risk that the lender accepted.⁷¹ Having outlined the conditions of the loan, Weston asserted that when the ship was:

ij myle of the said rode called Kyngrode where the saide shippe before she myght be brought into the same rode by grete tempest of weder was dryven uppon the lande . by meanes wherof the said shippe brake and all the goodes and merchaundises theryn conteyned were lost drowned and dryven away . by the rages of said tempest .⁷²

If Weston is to be believed, he was thus not obliged to repay the loan because the ship had sunk before it reached Kingroad safely. He complained, however, that despite this Thomas Smith had recently commenced an action of debt against him before the mayor of Bristol. Smith’s suit, launched, as Weston informed the chancellor, in the staple court of Bristol, was to set in train a series of legal actions that reveal much about William Weston’s character. The story can be pieced together from five different sources, including the town’s chronicle and Weston’s petition in chancery.

Thomas Smith, a merchant with a far larger and more established trade than Weston, commenced his action for debt on 10 March 1490, two years after the wreck, claiming that Weston had repeatedly ignored his requests for repayment. As was not uncommon, Weston defaulted on his initial appearance. In accordance with the normal procedures of the staple court, on 13 March an order was made for his arrest. As a result, Weston was ‘attached’, that is, bail was given by a fellow merchant to ensure Weston’s continuing appearance in person.⁷³ Smith is likely to have been well acquainted with the circumstances of the *Anthony*’s loss, since he had shipped on its outward journey.⁷⁴ This, on the other hand, was no doubt true of most of Bristol’s commercial community, such

⁷⁰ T.N.A., C 1/175/45.

⁷¹ Ward, *World of the Medieval Shipmaster*, pp. 72–3.

⁷² T.N.A., C 1/175/45.

⁷³ T.N.A., KB 27/921, rot. 32; B.R.O., 01854, rough notebook of a clerk of Bristol’s staple court, p. 91.

⁷⁴ T.N.A., E 122/20/7, m. 23, cloths to a value of £66 10s. The 1492/3 ledger suggests that Thomas Smith had a diverse pattern of trade, mostly, but not exclusively, to Spain and Portugal. Its total value in 1492/3 was in excess of £600, a pattern and volume still evident in 1503/4 (T.N.A., E 122/20/9; ‘Bristol “Particular” Customs Account, 1503/4’). However, he did not attain high civic office until 1506, when he replaced the incumbent sheriff who had died in office (B.R.O., 04720, fo. 135 [Ricart’s Chronicle]; confirmed by T.N.A., E 372/351, Bristol).

was the scale of the loss. Indeed, the shippers so affected included Clement Wiltshire, constable in the staple court for 1489–90, and Henry Vaughan, who was the brother of Thomas Vaughan, the sergeant-at-mace charged with both Weston's arrest and the summons of a jury.⁷⁵

It was the commencement of Smith's action, and the possibility of its rapid and adverse conclusion, that spurred Weston to petition the lord chancellor, claiming that Smith had gained the 'unlauffull fauour' of the mayor, who would now be judging the case.⁷⁶ Calling on a well-worn formula, Weston continued in the same vein, asserting that the twelve jurors were 'so parciall *with* [biased in favour of] the same Thomas [Smith]' that he was sure to lose.⁷⁷ He therefore asked that Bristol's mayor be ordered to certify the king in chancery of the cause of his arrest. It was Weston's expressed hope that the chancellor's intervention would result in the case being removed to chancery, where it could be tried on grounds of equity according to 'right and good conscience'. The petition achieved some immediate success, in that an order was made for the issue of a writ of *certiorari*, returnable into chancery within a month of the Easter following, that is, by 11 May.⁷⁸ Typically, the mayor and his officers would have answered the *certiorari* by supplying the chancery with a summary or full record of proceedings in Bristol prior to their receipt of the writ, enabling an initial paper review of the case in the king's court.⁷⁹ Respite for Weston proved, however, to be short-lived, and his petition to the chancellor is unlikely to have achieved a formal hearing. This is confirmed by two further narratives that not only give a great deal more detail concerning the outcome of the case, but also present a different colour both to any interpretation of Weston's actions and concerning the probity of the Bristol court. It is through these independent narratives that William Weston's account starts to unravel, showing that he used every available device of the law to evade payment and postpone judgment, while also casting doubt on his claims of prejudicial treatment.

Weston did not dispute the authenticity of the original debt, his 'bill obligatory' being deposited in evidence in the staple court.⁸⁰ Yet the chronology of the staple court's proceedings, set against those of chancery, is revealing. Given that the 120-mile journey between Bristol and London typically took two to three days, it seems likely that Weston used the opportunity of his own initial non-appearance on 10 March to petition the chancellor at Westminster. Despite what he claimed in his petition about the jury's evident bias, Weston's petition must have been submitted before the empanelment of a jury was ordered on 15 March. In the event, the jury's names were only returned in

⁷⁵ T.N.A., E 122/20/7, m. 23. For the various civic offices held by the Vaughan family, see 'Will of George Smith, merchant of Bristol, 1490', ed. M. M. Condon and E. T. Jones (University of Bristol, 2011) <<https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/3258829/2011smithwill.pdf>> [accessed 13 July 2018].

⁷⁶ The mayor this year was Robert Strange. For the staple court, operating under mercantile law and in general offering speedy redress, see '*Lex Mercatoria*' and *Legal Pluralism: a Late 13th Century Treatise and its Afterlife*, ed. C. Donahue and others (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), pp. 119–20 (italic), 6–10; *The Staple Courts of Bristol*, ed. E. E. Rich (Bristol Rec. Soc., v, 1934); *Great Red Book of Bristol, Part III*, pp. 17–24.

⁷⁷ This allegation was important to Weston's plea because it potentially secured chancery's jurisdiction in the suit. 27 Edw. III Stat. 2, c. 21 offered speedy redress in such cases by resort to the chancellor and council (*Statutes of the Realm*, i. 340–41).

⁷⁸ T.N.A., C 1/175/45, verso.

⁷⁹ The original writ does not survive, although there are other Bristol examples in the files (T.N.A., C 244, *passim*). The full defining phrase of the writ, in translation, is 'wishing for certain reasons to be informed'.

⁸⁰ There is one discrepancy: Smith claimed the loan was agreed in Bristol (B.R.O., 01854, p. 91; T.N.A., KB 27/921, rot. 32; cf. C 1/175/45). Thomas Smith (if the same man) was resident in Lisbon in 1489, and perhaps 1488 also (*Memorials of King Henry VII*, ed. J. Gairdner (Rolls Ser., 1858), p. 196).

Bristol on 17 March, this being just one day before chancery issued the *certiorari*. Weston then played still further for time, producing his chancery writ in Bristol only once the jury finally appeared on 26 March, after several defaults. As Weston must have anticipated, on sight of the writ the mayor immediately put Smith's suit in suspense.⁸¹

Since no pledges to prosecute are entered on Weston's chancery petition, the chancery court may not have asserted jurisdiction. Either way, Thomas Smith was successful in obtaining a writ of *remitimus*, returning the case to Bristol, where it recommenced on 18 June. Weston, however, now tried a further ploy to defer judgment, producing a *corpus cum causa* out of the court of king's bench, dated 16 June. This writ in effect demanded his own appearance in person to prosecute an unrelated suit for trespass, despite this being a court where the use of attorneys was common practice. Since Weston was still technically a prisoner in the custody of the Bristol officials, the writ required the mayor and his officers to produce Weston's body (*corpus*) at Westminster the following Michaelmas term, and, in their reply to the writ, to indicate the cause of his imprisonment. The immediate result was to force the Bristol court to suspend proceedings once more, but the respite was brief. Smith countered with a writ of *procedendo*, dated 25 June. This permitted the staple court to proceed with the case between Smith and Weston, notwithstanding the earlier writ. On 2 July 1490, the Bristol jury gave their verdict for Smith, declaring on oath that the ship came in safety to the port of its discharge called Kingroad. The mayor, in his capacity as judge, then awarded Smith the full £15 6s 8d debt, with a further one pound in costs and damages.⁸²

Despite Weston's earlier assertions about the jury's partiality made, it would seem, before their names were even known, the Bristol jury appears to have been well chosen. It included five 'mariners', all of whom were experienced shipmasters. Three of them, Henry Moyle, William Thomas and John Walshe, were familiar with the management of a great ship. Indeed, Moyle had taken the *Anthony* to Lisbon in November 1485 and frequently traded also as a merchant in his own right. Of the other two shipmasters, Thomas Griffith, as master of the *Peter* of London, had sailed in the *Anthony's* company from Lisbon to Bristol in May 1487. All five men knew the long voyage from Bristol to Lisbon or Andalusia well.⁸³ Besides the 'mariners', the jury included six merchants, at least four of whom traded on the Lisbon route, with one, John Stokes, being a regular user of the *Anthony*. The final member of the jury was Thomas Snygge, a future sheriff of Bristol.⁸⁴

Although Weston had been defeated in the staple court, he had one last card to play. In May 1491, he lodged an appeal in the court of king's bench, alleging five errors in law. Four were little more than semantics, based on omissions in the written record of the staple court; and at least one such 'error' was speedily discounted by the chief justice.

⁸¹ T.N.A., KB 27/921, rot. 32 and d.

⁸² T.N.A., C 1/175/45; KB 27/921, rots. 32d and 32 continuation, r. d.

⁸³ T.N.A., KB 27/921, rot. 32 continuation; E 122/20/5, fo. 2v (Moyle); E 122/20/1, fo. 2 (William Thomas: *Mary Grace*); E 122/20/1, fo. 6 (John Walshe: the *Trinity*, a great ship, to Lisbon 1483); E 122/20/7, m. 25 (John Walshe: *Mary Grace*, a great ship, to Seville 1486–7); E 122/20/7, m. 14 (Thomas Griffith). Moreover, the *Peter*, otherwise the *Peter Grafton*, had made a return journey to Lisbon 1485–6 under the *Anthony's* master of 1487–8, John Girdeler (E 122/20/5, fos. 5, 25v). The fifth shipmaster was Thomas Sutton, by the mid 1480s the regular master of the London-registered *navicula*, the *Trinity* sailing to Iceland in 1486 and Bordeaux 1486–8 (E 122/20/5, fo. 31; E 122/20/7, mm. 4d, 11; E 122/161/27, fos. 1, 27).

⁸⁴ For Thomas Baker, Roger Dawes, John Harper and John Stokes, see T.N.A., E 122/20/1, fo. 4v; E 122/20/5, fos. 3, 16v, 17v, 18, 20, 24r–v, 29v; E 122/20/7, mm. 2d, 6v, 14v, 15; E 122/161/27, fo. 25v; for William Gifford and John Rowland, see E 122/20/5, fo. 23; E 122/20/7, mm. 6d, 11, 21d, 24d. Only Snygge seems not, at this date, to have traded overseas.

The fifth ‘error’ was Weston’s assertion that, instead of pleading that the ship did not arrive safely, he should have pleaded that it did not arrive. The plea roll entry ends inconclusively in Easter term 1492, and judgment in error may never have been achieved.⁸⁵

If Weston proved dogged in pursuing legal alternatives, he seems to have been economical with the truth. First, he claimed in chancery that the Bristol jury was biased against him, even though it had yet to be empanelled. A year and half later, in king’s bench, he attempted to alter his plea in respect of the loss of the *Anthony*, splitting legal hairs in the process, despite the fact that multiple witnesses were clear that the ship *had* reached Kingroad before being wrecked. Evasions of this sort were similarly to be evident in Weston’s later dealings with the respected Bristol merchant, John Esterfeld, as the latter engaged in the thankless and ultimately very expensive task of serving as executor to John Foster’s will, as he strove to secure the endowment of Foster’s almshouse foundation.⁸⁶ Weston’s legal antics and economy with the truth are unlikely to have improved his reputation in the port. And this is significant in a world where a merchant’s credit was heavily reliant on his perceived reliability and trustworthiness. Indeed, on the issue of the debt, Weston probably lost even the support of John Foster, the *Anthony*’s former owner and Weston’s employer. Weston’s relationship with Foster certainly dated back to 1481 and seems to have remained positive for at least a year after the loss of the *Anthony*.⁸⁷ Yet Foster did not offer assistance when it came to Smith’s suit.⁸⁸

Regardless of the impact that Weston’s troubles had on his reputation in Bristol, these setbacks did not stop him from obtaining the affection of Foster’s daughter, Agnes, whom he went on to marry. This must have occurred in 1491 or the first part of 1492, as is indicated by two wills. The first of these is the will of the Bristol merchant George Smith, written on 5 November 1490 and proved on 10 February 1491. Smith had been a rising Bristol merchant and shipowner, with good connections to Bristol’s elite. His will, written from his deathbed, includes bequests to ‘Agnes Foster that shuld haue ben my wif’.⁸⁹ Whatever Agnes’s feelings for George, her bereavement did not last long, since her father’s will of 6 August 1492 describes his daughter as ‘Agnes my daughter wif unto William Weston merchaunt’.⁹⁰ On this timetable, Agnes married William Weston sometime between the start of 1491 and July 1492.

While the marriage to Agnes turned William Weston into John Foster’s son-in-law, Foster’s will implies that he was unhappy with the union. For despite being one of Bristol’s richest merchants, he left absolutely nothing to his son-in-law and

⁸⁵ T.N.A., KB 2 7/921, rots. 32, 32d and 32 continuation. The ensuing legal discussion, exploring the different practices of the law merchant and common law, was reported by the lawyer John Caryll (*Reports of Cases by John Caryll*, ed. J. H. Baker (2 vols., Selden Soc., cxv, cxvi, 1999, 2000), i. 88–9).

⁸⁶ ‘Foster’s Almshouse’, ed. T. J. Manchee, in *The Bristol Charities, being the Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring concerning Charities in England and Wales, so far as relates to the Charitable Institutions of Bristol* (2 vols., Bristol, 1831), i. 80–4; see below, nn. 91–2.

⁸⁷ It seems likely that Weston was in Foster’s employ by Apr. 1481, when he appeared in Bristol’s tolsey court to testify on Foster’s behalf in a suit of debt (B.R.O., JTol/J/1/2, fo. 106). In 1489 the two men co-operated to secure bail for John Tyler, who was probably the prominent weaver of that name (B.R.O., 01854, p. 4).

⁸⁸ B.R.O., 01854, p. 91. Instead, bail was given by William de la Founte.

⁸⁹ T.N.A., PROB 11/8, fo. 292v (will of George Smith); ‘Will of George Smith’, transcript and commentary.

⁹⁰ Apart from the lease on the house, Foster left Agnes £40 in silver plate and £40 in salt (T.N.A., PROB 11/9, fo. 66; ‘Will of John Foster, merchant of Bristol, 6 August 1492’, ed. E. T. Jones (University of Bristol, 2009) <<https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/3010780/FosterWill2008.pdf>> [accessed 13 July 2018].

comparatively little to Agnes, who was his only daughter. Indeed, Foster indicated that even the house in which Agnes and William lived would only be granted to them during Agnes's lifetime; and was to carry an annual rent-charge 'if necessitie ... require' towards the repair of Foster's almshouse and associated chantry chapel. Moreover, the penalty Foster imposed for non-compliance was both rapid and harsh. If Weston and his wife did not maintain the property, or pay the quit-rents arising from it, Foster's executors were to evict the pair of them within two months.⁹¹ Foster, it appears, was not pleased with his daughter and new son-in-law and sought to ensure that, should Agnes die before William, the latter would receive nothing. To this end Foster arranged further that if his only son, Richard, died without surviving issue, then all his inherited property would also go to fund the almshouse.⁹²

Little has been found about William Weston in the years between Foster's death in 1492 and the arrival of John Cabot in Bristol in 1495/6.⁹³ Since Weston is not recorded in the 1492/3 'particular' customs account, it seems that he did not attempt to use the modest bequest Agnes had received following her father's death to engage in overseas trade from 'their' Corn Street property, even though it was one of the largest houses on Bristol's principal commercial street. It may be that he found employ in the service of other merchants. If he did, it does not seem likely that he prospered, for a chancery petition presented c.1498 by Foster's executor, John Esterfeld, shows that the Westons had not, from the start, paid the quit-rents due on their house and had reputedly not maintained it adequately. This was why Esterfeld petitioned 'the King in Chancery' for redress. It was the court's subsequent injunction against Weston that led the merchant to approach the king directly, asking that the case be respited while he undertook his expedition to the 'new founde land'.

Based on the available evidence William Weston did not thrive during the fourteen-nineties; he did not attain great wealth or status and he was probably not highly regarded within Bristol. In some ways he might seem a rather odd supporter or companion for Cabot to acquire. On the other hand, John Cabot, who had fled Venice as an insolvent debtor eight years earlier, might have felt some affinity for Weston. They were of a similar age and had travelled more widely than many of their contemporaries. Perhaps, above all, they were both failed merchants: Cabot having been forced to flee Venice in 1488; while Weston was involved in the loss of the *Anthony* in the same year, following a career in which he seems to have been little more than a commercial servant of other men. Both men were pursued by their creditors and Cabot had experienced further disappointments and, in Castile, some loss of reputation, when ambitious civil

⁹¹ This matter is explored in Jones, 'Henry VII and the Bristol expeditions to North America', pp. 449–51; 'Will of John Foster'; and 'John Esterfeld *vs.* William Weston of Bristol: Chancery petition transcript, c.1499', ed. E. T. Jones (University of Bristol, 2009) <<https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/3011878/1499esterfeld.pdf>> [accessed 13 July 2018].

⁹² The re-foundation of the almshouse by John Esterfeld shows that this transfer did indeed happen, although not quite in the form originally intended ('Will of John Foster'; 'Foster's Almshouse', pp. 80–9; *Great Red Book of Bristol, Part III*, pp. 175–81; T.N.A., PROB 11/13, fo. 83, will of John Walshe).

⁹³ Even in 1491 Weston's credit cannot have been completely exhausted, since he obtained speedy justice in the tolsey court against a Portuguese merchant (T.N.A., C 244/140, nos. 46, 62). A suit for £25 against William Adams 'hakeyman' (hackneyman) in Jan. 1492 suggests some trading activity (B.R.O., 08154, p. 123); and a release of 1494 hints at a continuing association with William Wodington, by then deceased (*Cal. Close Rolls 1485–1500*, no. 747). Given Weston's later difficulties with John Esterfeld, however, it would be useful to know whether the explorer was the feoffee named for Esterfeld in a fine of 1493 (T.N.A., CP 25/1/202/42, no. 13).

engineering projects he proposed in Valencia and Seville (c.1492–4) came to naught.⁹⁴ Although Weston's situation was less extreme, by the late fourteen-nineties he must have realised that his failure to pay the quit rents on Agnes's house meant that he was in danger of losing a status symbol that set him apart from lesser men. Cabot and Weston thus had much in common. Both were adventurers who had engaged in ambitious commercial expeditions, both had experienced financial disaster, and both were men whom their more successful contemporaries might have regarded as little more than failed merchants of uncertain reputation. For Cabot and Weston an Atlantic venture might have seemed like a final gamble. If they failed, the worst that could happen was that they died. And in Weston's case, the irony was that if he died on his independent voyage, it might at least have secured the possession of his wife's house, which had been threatened by the legal action taken by John Esterfeld until the king's intervention on Weston's behalf.⁹⁵ On the other hand, both explorers could hope that, if their voyages succeeded, they might achieve wealth and fame. As it happened, Cabot did at least acquire the latter, even if, like Columbus, lasting fame did not come about until long after the explorer's death. Weston, on the other hand, despite being rewarded by the king for his expedition, died within a few years of his final voyage. By December 1504 his wife, Agnes, was described as a widow, albeit still living in the Corn Street house.⁹⁶ And thereafter, Weston's contribution to England's first attempts to explore the New World was forgotten.

No will survives for Weston. He has left no letters and, as far as is known, no heirs. That so much can be recovered of the man, after five hundred years of silence, is a surprise. The pursuit of Weston has produced new evidence concerning England's early attempts to expand its commercial horizons into both the eastern Mediterranean and the west coast of Africa. A major character, and a new voyage to North America, have been identified, throwing more light on events long regarded as among the most enigmatic maritime expeditions of the Age of Discovery.⁹⁷ Weston's voyage of exploration to the new land bridges the gap between John Cabot's three voyages of 1496–8 and the Bristol expeditions of the early fifteen-hundreds, and appears to have been a purely English enterprise. All that has been found so far, moreover, fits well with Alwyn Ruddock's claims about Weston. On the other hand, it has not been possible to verify all her Weston narrative. Where exactly did he go and what did he achieve that made Henry VII grant him a significant reward? What was the basis, beyond a reinterpretation of Hakluyt, for Ruddock's suggestion that Weston's expedition involved a ship called the *Dominus Nobiscum*, or that it sailed as far north as the Hudson Strait? As yet, the answers to such questions remain unresolved. But two things are clear. The first is that Ruddock's claims have continued to prove key to opening new lines of research; the second is that Weston may be the most important English explorer who, until very recently, nobody had ever heard of.

⁹⁴ For the failure of Cabot's 1492–3 plans to improve the harbour at Valencia, not least because funds were not forthcoming, see M. Ballesteros-Gaibrois, 'Juan Caboto en España: nueva luz sobre un problema viejo', *Revista de Indias*, iv (1943), 607–27; supporting documents translated in Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 196–9. For Cabot's default on his 1494 proposal to build a bridge over the Guadalquivir in Seville and his dismissal by the city council, see J. Gil, *Mitos y utopías del Descubrimiento* (3 vols., Madrid, 1989), i, 77–81.

⁹⁵ There is no indication that Esterfeld took separate action against Agnes, although he did indeed transfer the reversionary two-thirds title to the almshouse according to the terms of Foster's will ('Foster's Almshouse', pp. 81–2; T.N.A., PROB 11/14, fos. 206v–7, will of John Esterfeld).

⁹⁶ *Great Red Book of Bristol, Part III*, p. 176; T.N.A., PROB 11/14, fo. 206v.

⁹⁷ R. H. Fuson, 'The John Cabot mystique', in *Essays on the History of North American Discovery and Exploration*, ed. S. H. Palmer (Arlington, Tex., 1988), pp. 35–51.